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The Politics in Religion:

Keller's *Sieben Legenden* and His Political Engagement

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The Politics in Religion:

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The Politics in Religion:

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Gottfried Keller's *Sieben Legenden* (1872) are, on the surface, a collection of moral fables appealing to a system of Christian ethics that is in accord with Church dogmatics. However, such a reading discounts how the origin of the texts spans various periods of Keller's own life experiences, education and political activities. This project exposes the political elements involved in Keller's strategic re-use of religious materials drawn from the *Golden Legend*, various prophetic books of the Bible, hagiography, and the German mystic Angelus Silesius in the *Legenden* and explores how he uses this cycle of short stories to question Church ethics, family morals and the political impulses of the nineteenth century -- both in his native Switzerland and in Germany --, including Swiss religious struggles and the founding

of the German Empire in 1870. It is my contention that Keller's political life prompted his writing of the *Legenden* and influenced the timing of their publication, and that critics' attempts to limit his use of religious diction to a response to Feuerbach greatly underestimate the popular resonance of religious tropes and figures as commentaries on political situations and ideologies. His careful juxtapositions of source materials from the Roman-Christian era's martyrologies with High Medieval stories of redemption lead to the famous "Tanzlegendchen," which suggests the absolute bankruptcy of all ideology.

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The Politics in Religion:

Keller's *Sieben Legenden* and His Political Engagement

Gottfried Keller's *Sieben Legenden* are, on the surface, a collection of moral fables based on the *Golden Legend* and the writings of early Church fathers. Each story appears to appeal to a system of Christian ethics that is familiar from Church dogmatics. However, such a reading would discount Keller's own life experiences, education and political leanings. With this project, it is my goal to expose the political underpinnings of Keller's *Legenden* and explore the dichotomy he creates between Church ethics and civic virtue. It is my contention that Keller's political life prompted his writing of the *Legenden* and influenced the timing of their publication.

Keller's *Legenden* were finished in 1871 and first published in 1872. However, it is generally accepted that Keller began writing this collection of short stories as early as 1855, in Berlin, and certainly no later that 1857/58. The publication of the *Legenden* coincided with the end of Keller's *Staatsschreiberamt* in his hometown of Zürich.[1] This gap between the inception of the short story cycle

[1] Information concerning these dates can be found in both Kittstein 137-144 and in Jeziorkowski's compilation of Keller's letters 455.

and their final publication might make it seem that Keller was uninterested in the material. However, this publication information actually informs a closer reading of the texts, as, I will argue, this work is very much tied to Keller's personal and political experiences and is an attempt to address his political situation through popular literature.

The key to justifying these tales as political interventions can be found in the letters Keller wrote after the legends' publication. One letter that Keller wrote to Carl Schüddekopf explained that his *Legenden* are based on a collection first published by the theologian Ludwig Kosegarten in 1804.[2] The sources for Kosegarten's collection included canonical texts from early Christianity, early Church fathers, legends from the middle ages and the *Golden Legend.* A letter that Keller wrote to Friedrich Theodor Vischer, dated 1871, explains that he remembers first hearing Kosegarten's stories read aloud in the home of Otto Wesendock in the 1850s. Keller asserts that it was his goal to create an *ironic* reproduction of Kosegarten's legends.[3] For the reading that will be pursued here, the key word in

[2] In comparing Keller's legends to Kosegarten's, it is clear that Keller used these only as a starting point. Keller's legends vary greatly from Kosegarten's and in many cases, Keller changed the names of the characters. The moments where Keller more closely follows Kosegarten's writing will be discussed in the body of this text.

[3] In this 1871 letter, Keller writes that he is toying with the idea of adding a humoristic foreword that declares the legends are about becoming Catholic. He wonders in this letter if his humor would be understood and if the foreword would have the desired effect. Further hinting at his ironic intentions, in a letter written to Eugène Rambert in 1872, Keller mentions the mottos he uses to begin each legend. He notes he began each legend with a religious motto because he was pretending to be a learned theologian. He admits that in his search for irony (as he is not a learned

the previous sentence is *ironic,* as it is most instructive to explore what Keller's *ironic* reproductions reveal about his social and political views. The conclusion to this essay will take up further details about the publication timeline, Keller's activities before the publication of the *Legenden* and the political situation in Europe at the time of their publication, arguing *why* Keller wrote the *Legenden*: as a commentary on the intersections between religious and civic life in his Switzerland.

The *Legenden* as a Collection of Ironies

Keller's *Sieben Legenden* are easily divided into three groups according to their setting within the history of Christianity. Three *Legenden* are historically located in the early Christian era, three are set in a Romantic version of Europe in the Middle Ages and one outlier is set predominantly in heaven. In this sense, Keller appears to be telling stories on a progressive historical arc leading to the image of salvation, moving clearly from virtues of conversion, to stabilization or realization of God's moral code and then ultimately to the final gift of a pious life, namely, a place in heaven.

It would have been straightforward for a readership to take them in the sense of a Hegelian dialectic of history, positing Christian history as moving from opposition to Rome, through an era of self stabilization and moving toward salvation. Yet, that assumption misleads from the first. Each of Keller's *Legenden,* in

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theologian) he misquoted the passage that precedes *Eugenia* and had to have his editor make a last minute change.

fact, confronts the reader with counterweights to what one might expect from stories told on the pattern of saints' lives: the Christian virtues in the stories do anything but develop in ever-greater spiritual perfection.

In the *Legenden* associated with the historically first, early Christian phase of Church history, Keller undermines such conversion narratives by exposing a disconnect between religious ethics and individual virtue in a world still dominated by the Roman Empire. In the second phase, set in the European Middle Ages, Keller reveals the limits and even misuses and misunderstandings of religious ethics and argues for self-reliance and this-worldly engagement. The final phase shows the end goal of a penitent life, a place in heaven, to be bereft of true joy.

Each legend begins with a motto drawn from a wide variety of sources within the Christian traditions including the Old Testament and popular devotional literature. These mottos point to the moral encoded in each legend, as Keller bends their meanings to his views as he denies a Christian moral reading of his *Legenden* and reveals his critical opposition and counter narrative.

A significant hint towards Keller's overall purpose also lies in the mottos themselves, which come from a surprising variety of sources:

TITLE	MOTTO SOURCE
Eugenia	Book of Moses
Die Jungfau und der Teufel	Angelus Silesius
Die Jungfrau als Ritter	Angelus Silesius

Die Jungfrau und die Nonne	Psalms
Der schlimm-heilige Vitalis	Thomas à Kempis
Dorotheas Blumenkörbchen	Franciscus Ludovicus Blosius
Das Tanzlegendchen	Book of Jeremiah

The mottos give a consistent indicator that the legends are meant to be prophetic or mystical. The Books of Moses and Jeremiah are both associated with prophets; Psalms are the songs of King David, a kind of mysticism. Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*, written in the mid-1400s, was a popular devotional manual, a best-seller among Christians of that era (and beyond). This is a mystical text of theological consolation, read by both Catholics and Protestants that instructs Christians to follow Christ's example. Angelus Silesius was born in Silesia as a Lutheran but converted to Catholicism; his *Der Cherubinische Wandersmann* ("The Cherubinic Pilgrim") is a text of over 1600 alexandrine couplets exploring mysticism, originally published in 1657. Franciscus Ludovicus Blosius (Louis de Blois) was a sixteenth-century Flemish mystic Benedictine who wrote in Latin, but whose major books of devotion were translated into most European languages as bestsellers.[4]

Ultimately, these mottos for the "fractured saints' lives" to which we will turn in the next section suggest that we cannot read the *Legenden* as a critique of religion

[4] Information about these mystical writers can be found in the *New Advent Catholic Encyclopedia.* This can be found online at < http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/>

alone. Keller's selected mottos seem to point to *personal* Christianity directed at devotions of everyday life, as well as to escapes from the here and now, as opposed to dogmatic forms of Christianity. After all, as we shall see, Keller does not deny any of the characters in his *Legenden* their ability to live what they consider a "Christian" experience. Those saints known as martyrs are still martyred in his versions, and those protagonists who pray to the Virgin Mary do receive aid. Nonetheless, Keller's messages clearly are intended to diverge from any Christian or Catholic orthodoxies. Yet, they are also not simply representative of the radical humanism associated with Feuerbach's *Wesen des Christentums* (1841), with which critics so often associate Keller's works.[5] More than advocating an atheist worldview, or denying Christianity any value, Keller draws out a more complex set of questions about theological and individual virtue, including religious ethics. And, the prophetic elements in the legends ought draw our attention to this set of questions. Keller is not policing the spiritual lives of his audience, but questioning their motivations. Let us now turn to the three groups of legends themselves and trace Keller's responses to his own complex network of questions.

1. *Legenden* from the Early Christian Era

Keller uses a quote from the Book of Moses as his introductory motto to the first legend, *Eugenia:* "Ein Weib soll nicht Mannsgeräte tragen, und ein Mann soll nicht Weiberkleider antun; denn wer solches tut, ist dem Herrn, deinem Gott, ein

[5] For more on this see Ackert 46, Ermatinger 396-432, and Ulrich Kittstein 137-144.

Greuel" (5. Mos. 22.5). This motto is found in the Old Testament amongst a series of verses and chapters declaring God's laws. And, that at the beginning of the story, Eugenia busies herself with men's pursuits (education), and her life threatening predicament at the end of the story is related to her manly position (abbot of a monastery) and attire (monk's habit), one might conclude that Eugenia simply failed to follow one of God's clearly defined laws. After all, she is rescued by her scorned lover, the proconsul Aquilinus, from her adventures in manhood and they live happily ever after until they are martyred. In this sense, this legend can be read as a simple moral fable reinforcing God's law: God's law was not followed, then it was. Our protagonists lived happily until dying in God's name to receive their rewards in heaven.

However, a closer reading of the text reveals that Eugenia's predicament is not the result of her manly activities, dress or failure to follow God's law. Both Eugenia and Aquilinus are named after saints who are noted martyr figures of the early Christian era, and the Christian virtues represented in this legend are beyond reproach. A probably apocryphal saint, St. Eugenia of Rome's story is included in the *Golden Legend*[6]; she had cross-dressed and become an abbot, then was accused of adultery by a woman she had cured. Despite her exoneration, she was eventually beheaded on 25 December 258, after a career of converting many to the faith. There

[6] This is a collection of hagiographies by Jacobus de Voragine, compiled ca. 1260 and continuously reedited as a bestseller. A full version of the earliest English translation, done by William Caxton in 1483, is available online at < http://saints.sqpn.com/the-golden-legend-by-blessed-jacobus-de-voragine/>

are at least four prominent saints named Aquilinus, none of whom are in the *Golden Legend*, but three of whom were early martyrs (the fourth was a married bishop turned hermit, discussed by Bede). The most famous of them was born in Würzburg but martyred as Bishop of Milan in 1015; he is the most probable one because he, like Eugenia, was associated with miracle cures.

As Keller recasts her story, Eugenia's predicament is located in her flight from the civic sphere and the virtues to be found in this-worldly engagement. Before Eugenia dons the monk's habit and enters the monastery as a man, Aquilinus asks her to be his wife. Eugenia requests that Aquilinus first share in her studies and love of learning in order to see if they are compatible. Aquilinus refuses to do this and declares that he just wants a simple answer from her, but an answer "nicht als ein Gelehrter, sondern als ein Weib von Fleisch und Blut!" (535). Therein lies the problem. Aquilinus wants a wife who will share the joys of the corporeal world and, though he never asks Eugenia to give up her intellectual pursuits, it is clear that Eugenia cannot compartmentalize her life. Hers is a life of the mind, and her indifference towards the rest of the world leads her into the monastery. Eugenia passes on love and, in the end, chooses spirituality. That is the flaw in Eugenia's character that Keller wishes to expose in this legend.

Keller's focus on the importance of love is made clear when he writes of Eugenia's inability to destroy a statue portraying her likeness. Eugenia's father has had a statue of his lost daughter erected at the temple of Minerva. Eugenia hears of this and resolves to destroy the statue. When she arrives in the night with a

hammer, she sees Aquilinus kissing the statue and her resolve is broken. The statue, representing love in this world, remains intact in its pagan setting. It is Eugenia's acceptance of this-worldly love, shown by her leaving the statue intact, that ultimately brings her salvation. We are to understand that her mental and religious exercises only served to lead her further away from this final salvation -- she escaped martyrdom to abstracts by espousing love.

Keller begins the second of the early Christian era legends, *Der schlimm-heilige Vitalis,* with the motto, "Meide den traulichen Umgang mit einem Weibe, empfiehl du überhaupt lieber das ganze andächtige Geschlecht dem lieben Gott" (Thomas a Kempis, Nachfolge, 8,2). This motto warns the male reader of the dangers of women and the Church's recommendation that women ought to be avoided and, in turn, commended only to God. Vitalis follows this recommendation as he willingly sullies his own reputation by visiting brothels in an attempt to convert the prostitutes to Christianity and send them to a convent. This character is again named for several different saints, most of whom were martyrs. The most famous, St. Vitalis of Assisi, had lived a wild youth, and became a monk to expiate those sins He died in 1370.

In the story of Mary Magdalene, Jesus "saved" the prostitute from social condemnation: "Let he among you who is without sin cast the first stone"(John 8:7). Vitalis' goal is based on the letter of that religious ethic and does not account for civic and economic realities, or the kind of compassion that the Bible story describes. Vitalis fails to see what the story clearly indicates: that the brothel can be

an economic necessity for some women. In fact, the particular brothel described in this legend is described as a functioning, almost ethical, business. Furthermore, Keller does not use the words *Prostituierte, Dirne* or *Hure* to characterize the women living in the brothels. This detail removes lust from the moral message of this legend. Instead, these sinners can be regarded as escorts, creating a different kind of business arrangement.

What Vitalis was tying to change did not necessarily need to be changed in order for the world to become a better place -- or at least, if it needed to be changed, not in the way he envisioned. The brothel visited by Vitalis is indeed a house of whores, but not a house of horrors. The woman he finds there is, in fact, the owner of the brothel. She is well protected by guards and is clearly making enough money to provide herself a comfortable life. She gladly takes Vitalis' money, listens to his conversion speech and prayers and promises to convert. When he returns the next day, the intelligent "sinner" claims to have never seen Vitalis before, but accepts his money once again. She is not innocent, but, again, lust has little to do with this situation.

While he is making these visits to the comfortable, stubborn brothel owner, a young woman (Jole, the daughter of a respected merchant) living across the street from the brothel notices Vitalis and falls in love with him. Putting another kind of financial transaction into play, she buys the brothel and plays the role of brothel owner in an attempt to seduce Vitalis on his next visit. She knows that only real love

in the real world can save Vitalis from his Christian ethics. She expresses this truth as she says,

> Wenn du nämlich in diesem Gewande und als geistlicher Mann zu mir sprichst, so ist das immer das gleiche, und das Gebaren eines Klerikers vermag mich nicht zu überzeugen, da ich der Welt angehöre, Ich kann nicht durch einen Mönch von der Liebe geheilt werden, da er sie nicht kennt und nicht weiß, von was er spricht . . . so geh in jenes Kammerlein, wo weltliche Gewänder bereit liegen. Dort vertausche deinen Mönchshabit mit jenen, schmücke dich als Weltman . . . (591)

Vitalis follows this command and is, in the end, "seduced" by the world and ultimately happy as he is excommunicated from the monastery from which he came. The brothel is not to be read as a place of sin, but rather, as a place representing the world and the civic virtues of human-to-human love, enterprise and the definition of "honest" business. Rather, if this story is a morality fable, it deals with how relations between men and women are structured by money, not morality. He buys the prostitute's time; the merchant's daughter buys him. Where, then, is the sin?

The third legend set in the Roman-Christian world, *Dorothea's Blumenkörbchen,* takes its motto from the writings of a French monk living in the sixteenth century. The motto is lifted from one of his popular devotional works (translated into English as early as 1676): "Aber sich so verlieren, ist mehr sich finden" (Franciscus Ludovicus Blosius, *Geistlicher Unterricht*, Cap.12). In strictly following this motto, it would seem clear that Dorothea's story is one of being lost

and then found through faith. Dorothea, presented with two lovers and loving only one (Theophilus), is unable to express this love and, hence, unable to locate her place in this world. Her solution is to convert to Christianity, become a martyr and "marry" God.

Again, it would be misguided to fully accept this moral imperative. As in the other legends, Keller puts the focus not on the protagonist's relationship with God, but rather, on human-to-human relationships. Dorothea's name is associated with several martyr-saints and one hermitess. St. Dorothea of Caesarea is often depicted with a basket of fruit and flowers, especially roses. "Theophilus" is associated with many patriarchs. In contrast to Kosegarten's version, in Keller's story, God does not represent self-realization or an end goal. Instead, God functions as a way to shirk difficult and necessary engagement with the world. Dorothea and Theophilus do love each other, but their immaturity keeps them separated. God, in this legend, is a refuge for immaturity.

Keller demonstrates this when depicting the moments before Dorothea's death at the stake. Theophilus runs to Dorothea as the flames threaten to consume her. He asks her if she is in pain and she replies, "'[W]ie sollte es weh tun, Theophilus? Das sind ja die Rosen meines vielgeliebten Bräutigams, auf denen ich liege! Sieh, heute ist meine Hochzeit!"'(599). Dorothea, in her immaturity, rebuffs Theophilus once again and asserts that she is marrying God. However, her feelings for Theophilus cannot be denied, so she continues to speak and implores him to come and join her in her religious ecstasy. Theophilus recoils at this final denial of

his love and bitterly tells her to send him the roses and apples of heaven once she gets there. Ulrich Kittstein points out that

> Dorothea's schwärmerische Reden vom ersehten himmlischen Bräutigam eigentlich auf Theophilus gemünzt sind. Daher besteht auch die jenseitige Seligkeit zunächst einmal in der harmonischen Einheit der Liebenden und darüber hinaus in einer mystischen Ganzheitserfahrung, die nicht auf Gott, sondern auf "alle Kreatur und alles Dasein" (419/79), also auf die Totalität des Lebens selbst bezogen ist. (141)

In this moment, Dorothea finally realizes that her marriage to God is premature and that to truly access her Self, she should have first accepted love in this world. Like Eugenia and Vitalis, she gains nothing from her disengagement with the world.

These three stories should be taken as a unit bound by historical reference points in the early Christian era and by a shared religious typology associating martyrs, hermits and those living a cloistered religious existence. In the abstract, they all are stories of "Christian virtue," but in the context of a Switzerland heavily impacted by the Protestant Reformation, they represent tales of the worst of Catholicism -- veneration of idols and false piety rather than practical engagement with the world. These tales thus signal the values not of Catholic Christianity, but of pragmatic, nuclear families. That the figure of the mother is absent from these legends further points to Keller's concern with the realities of life and the nuclear family.

2. The *Legenden* from the Medieval Era

The religious problematic gets even stronger in the other legends. As I noted in the opening, three of the *Legenden* are set in the European Middle Ages. These focus on the figure of the Virgin Mary and bring the reader into a world where the Christian message has been solidified and its ubiquity accepted -- a world of virtues and redemption, not of martyrs. Yet, in these stories, the Mother Mary does not represent the now unchallenged religion, but instead, she represents and protects the virtue of self-reliance. That virtue, however, again works with a twist pointing very clearly to a more Protestant reading, given that mariology is more a Catholic Christian strategy of world explanation than it is Protestant Christian (with the exception of high church Anglicanism).

When the protagonists in these legends are in need, the Virgin Mary does not *come* to them, she *becomes* them. Each character retains their earthy existence and any kind of miracle portrayed is actually of their doing. The first legend in this second grouping is *Die Jungfrau und der Teufel.* In this tale, Keller laments the misuses of Christian morality and again heralds his message of this-worldly engagement. The motto reads, "Freund! wach und schau dich um, der Teufel geht stets runden, Kommt er dir auf den Leib, so liegest du schon unten" (Angelus Silesius, *Cherub. Wandersmann* IV. Buch, 206). We are to meet the figure of the devil

in this story. However the real "devil" is not the Biblical figure, but rather, Gebizo, the count who agrees to sell his wife to the Prince of Darkness.[7]

God has blessed Gebizo. He has wealth, a castle and a devoted wife -- Bertrade. Gebizo uses his wealth to erect churches in the area and appears to follow God's law as we learn that he regularly uses his wealth to help the poor. However, Gebizo follows God's law for his own glory. He does not simply help the poor. He throws them lavish parties at the castle and frivolously uses his blessings to place himself at the center of attention. These religious misunderstandings and egoism lead Gebizo to fail to properly acknowledge Bertrade -- his most precious "possession" and indeed, something of the secular world. After exhausting all of his wealth, Gebizo falls into a deep depression, ignores his wife's love and finally makes a deal with the devil that allows him to keep his wealth. He offers the devil his wife in exchange for an endless supply of gold. As she is led to the devil by Gebizo, Bertrade stops in a chapel that they had built and prays to the Virgin Mary. Mary takes on Bertrade's outside form and eludes the devil. Gebizo dies on his ride home to the castle and Bertrade is left free to return home, where her desire for this-worldly love is promised to be requited.

The real danger in this story is Gebizo's misuse of God's moral code, his "egoistisches Christentum" (Kittstein 141) and his rejection of the true gifts of this world in the form of a loving wife. Though Bertrade is saved by Mary, the physical

[7] The name may allude to a bishop of Basel (ca. 984), to the founder of the Imperial Abbey of Weißenau, or to a saint who died in 987 <http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=3525>.

actor in this struggle is Bertrade herself. Her commitment to love and responsible virtues is what saves her from the devil's (Gebizo's) misdeeds. In this legend, this version of Christianity does not offer salvation, but damnation, because it is built on the letter rather than the spirit of the law. Here, Kosegarten's version is of interest. Instead of Gebizo (who is not given this name by Kosegarten) dying on his way back home, Kosegarten allows Gebizo to live and repent, showing that, through God, all can be overcome. Keller's focus remains on this-worldly actions, and spirituality cannot save us from ourselves.

Bertrade's story continues in the next installment of Keller's collection: *Die Jungfrau als Ritter,* beginning with the motto,

> Maria wird genn't ein Thron und Gott's Gezelt, Ein' Arche, Burg, Turm, Haus, ein Brunn, Baum, Garten, Spiegel, Ein Meer, ein Stern, Der Mond, die Morgenröt', ein Hügel: Wie kann sie alles sein? sie ist ein' andre Welt. (Angeli Silesii *Cherub. Wandersmann* IV. Buch, 42)

Following traditional Christian readings, we might think of this story as an ode to Mother Mary's versatility and protective nature. Yet, in this legend, Mary is not of "another world." She is again tied to a main character in the tale -- this time, the diffident knight Zendelwald.

Bertrade's capacity for true love is fulfilled in the spirit of the High Middle Ages when she is married to Zendelwald after he wins the knights' tournament held at Bertrade's castle. And though Zendelwald is purportedly acting with the help of Mary, he does not benefit from any spiritual relationship to the Mother of God. His

actions in winning the tournament are not tied to a religious moral code, but are the outgrowth of his new-found human strength. Zendelwald physically overcomes his adversaries, while spirituality does not figure into his success. Moreover, this legend tells us a lot about the politics of Keller's time. In an 1875 letter to Theodor Vischer, Keller explains that the two knights Zendelwald must defeat, Guhl der Geschwinde and Maus der Zahllose, are meant to represent national characters – France and pan-Slavism respectively, "welche die Muttergottes als deutscher Recke sukzessive besiegt" (Jeziorkowski 464). Zendelwald, the diffident knight, lacking a knight's virtue and representing Germany, uses his new-found strength (through Mary) to defeat his adversaries. We should read that, in Keller's view, Germany (Prussia) is indeed powerful, but lacking in substance. This theme will be picked up again later in this analysis.

The final legend set in the Middle Ages sharpens Keller's focus on the virtues of the corporeal world -- it seals the messages presented in the two "Bertrade" stories. The motto leading into the story to be discussed here, *Die Jungfrau und die Nonne,* is from the book of Psalms and it appears to speak to a kind of spiritual *wanderlust* aiming at the afterlife, but what we read in the legend is a nun confronted with *this*-worldly wanderlust: "Wer gibt mir Taubenflügel, daß ich auffliege und Ruhe finde" (Ps. 55.7). This psalm, about the wings of the dove bearing souls to rest in the afterlife, is absolutely inverted theologically in Keller's version.

Beatrix the nun gives *herself* wings: she leaves her convent and enters the world. Her experiences are quite worldly, and even global, as she eventually marries

a crusader she meets as he is returning from the Holy Land. In terms of the letter of the laws of morality, Beatrix' life in the world is not without vice. She lives with the crusader and enjoys his wealth before marrying, and she engages in the vice of gambling. In fact, her future husband gambles her away in a game of dice and she must, in turn, use this strategy to re-secure her freedom. These events remove the focus from vice and instead reveal the virtue of self-reliance.

Nonetheless, her actions outside of the convent (be they in line with the letter of dogmatic law or not) are actually sanctioned by the Virgin Mary. The church does not notice that Beatrix has gone missing: the Virgin Mary assumes Beatrix' body and continues to carry out Beatrix' duties at the convent while she is away. When her youngest son turns 18 and she has lived successfully as a citizen of the world, Beatrix returns to the convent. In Kosegarten's version, Beatrix understands herself as a sinner and her first impulse upon reaching the convent after so many years away is to turn and run. The Virgin Mary's forgiveness of her sins (symbolized by her returning the keys of the convent to Beatrix) is what convinces her to stay and repent. Keller writes only that Beatrix is surprised to find that Mary took on her appearance and kept her place at the convent. She accepts the keys to the convent without the understanding that she must now repent for her sins. Furthermore, we read that Beatrix is overcome by sadness in leaving the world and joining the other nuns. She feels no guilt and later, when the other nuns are celebrating at a festival and giving offerings to Mary at the altar, Beatrix does not take part. However, during the ceremony, Beatrix' husband and eight sons enter the chapel, bow before Mary

on the altar, and thus give a final gift to the Virgin Mary, the gift of the world. This gift is portrayed in the story as the greatest gift of all. Beatrix has given eight sons to Mary -- more than a proper household -- instead of the cloistered gifts of the nuns. Her rest -- the wings of her holy spirit-dove -- is a legacy in the world, not an afterlife.

As in the story of Vitalis, this tale revolves around individuals following the letter of the Christian law, but finding domestic virtue (and probably a more real set of virtues) when they leave the confines of the church and begin to "sin" as they find their way to love. In these three legends, there can be no question that Keller is asserting the importance of this worldly engagement and challenging what he considers a threadbare system of Christian dogma. Happiness is found in the world and families, not in a monastery or convent. Male or female, early Christian or Medieval, the world offers engagement and love.

3. *Das Tanzlegendchen*

Given the double-voicing of the previous legends (martyrologies and mariologies), it is no surprise that the final and most famous legend of the cycle, *Das Tanzlegendchen*, synthesizes Keller's views and projects these Christian values into heaven. Beginning with the motto, "Du Jungfrau Israel, du sollst noch fröhlich pauken, und herausgehen an den Tanz. – Alsdann werden die Jungfrauen fröhlich am Riegen sein, dazu die junge Mannschaft, und die Alten miteinander" (Jeremia 31.4.13), Keller takes the previous stories about theological virtue in the early

Christian era and self-reliance and worldly engagement in the Romantic Middle Ages and shows what the afterlife actually offers "the virtuous" of cloistered life. It is no accident, then, that the legend's motto is from the Book of Jeremiah, one of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Moreover, the legend's heroine has as her name the Arabic name for Moses, *Musa*, -- the prophet who receives the Law from God.

The ironies in these namings multiply. The action in das *Tanzlegendchen* mostly takes place in Heaven. However, the legend's action does begin on earth, and, counter to the motto at the beginning of the story, we learn that the main character, Musa, is not being asked to dance on earth – as is her greatest joy – but, rather, that her dancing is to be reserved for heaven, as her religious guides tell her she must.

She is the recipient of prophecies to confirm that choice. King David, representing the roots of Christianity (as the progenitor of the house into which Jesus is born), makes an empty promise to Musa. In a weird syncretic case of a saintly apparition, this pre-Christian representative of heaven visits her in a chapel as she dances before the altar, and he commences to dance with her. After they dance the most magnificent dance she has ever danced, he tells her to give up dancing in this life and instead live a penitent life. If she agrees to this, she will find the fulfillment of all of her joys in heaven. This is, of course, ironic, as David himself was once viewed with scorn for dancing before the Lord (2 Samuel 6:14). Moreover, King David's appearance runs counter to the book of Jeremiah, which warns against false prophets (Jeremiah 14:14).

Despite these biblical warnings, Musa agrees with the purportedly virtuous scenario proposed by David and gives up her greatest joy on earth. Following the words of the false prophet David, Musa herself embodies the prophetic message in Keller's version of this tale, warning against the false hopes of Christianity. And thus his Musa is not rewarded in heaven, which is portrayed by Keller as a place of lost souls.[8]

Though her first experiences in the afterlife agree with the promise of King David's words in the chapel, the circumstances under which this promise is fulfilled prove to be incompatible with more standard images of a true Christian heaven. The dancing and merriment experienced in heaven after Musa's arrival are actually made possible by the nine muses, invited upstairs from hell to provide life to the party. The muses' arrival for the next day of celebration in heaven, however, does not bring the previously experienced ecstasy. Instead, their arrival points to the divide between earthly existence (to be understood as offering love and happiness) and a cloistered life that rejects the gifts of life present in the everyday. This key passage from the story shows the emptiness of David's promise and Heaven itself:

[8] In Kosegarten's version, it is a priest who tells Musa (not given a name in Kosegarten's version) to give up dancing. Interestingly, Kosegarten's priest mentions the Biblical passages from Jeremiah and Samuel to prove to the girl that there is dancing in heaven. In his version, the character of Musa is indeed rewarded in heaven. Keller turns this scenario upside down in his version.

> Als nun der nächste Festtag im Himmel gefeiert wurde und die Musen wieder ihren Dienst taten… stellten sich zusammen auf und begannen sänftlich ihren Gesang… Aber in diesen Räumen klang es so duster, ja fast trotzig und rauh, und dabei so sehnsuchtschwer und klagend, daß erst eine erschrockene Stille waltete, dann aber alles Volk von Erdenleid und Heimweh ergriffen wurde und in ein allgemeines Weinen ausbrach. (607)

The key word in the quote on which to focus is *Heimweh*. Turning away from our lives on earth and engaging in spiritual gymnastics is portrayed as fruitless and empty. Indeed, the muses, representatives of the joys of the earth as portrayed in the pre-Christian world, are not welcome, nor able to bring their worldly virtues into the morally rigid walls of heaven.

We are left to conclude, in this choice of showing the *Tanzlegendchen* as culmination of the set, as standing in the place of a Hegelian *Aufhebung*, that Keller is asserting that this world is our home -- a conclusion outside or beyond all forms of Christianity. This legend, marked by a special claim to prophecy (and a warning against false prophets), leads us back to Keller's own worldview and demands that we try to understand why he wrote *Die sieben Legenden*. In *Das Tanzlegendchen,* Musa/Moses can be read as warning the reader of "Egypt" (the nation restricting the emergence of true Jewish religion) and its false God/gods.

It is now important to explain how Keller's nineteenth-century Switzerland can be read as an analogue to the "Egypt" about which Keller warns the reader in his legends. Even the briefest recourse to the historical facts surrounding the religious

politics of Keller's Switzerland makes it clear that these legends, brought to their conclusion at a very precise political moment, must be seen as Keller's political testament.

Keller's Political Switzerland and Berlin

Keller's Switzerland is much different than the Switzerland we know today. In the early- to mid-nineteenth century, the 22 cantons that are now recognized as unified under the name "Switzerland" were set pieces in a continental game of power politics.[9] However, with the influence of Napoleon waning and old imperial powers struggling to maintain their hegemony in Europe, the Swiss states (along with those in Germany, for example) began realizing that the 19th century had the potential to be a century of nation building and unification. Yet, not all those living in the Swiss states were of a like mind and confessional differences in Switzerland created a tense situation.

J. Murray Luck clarifies the Swiss condition in his *History of Switzerland* as he writes, "[T]he (post-Napoleonic) suffering into which Switzerland was plunged from 1816 to 1820 or so spawned an extraordinary interest in pietism and in religious sects of many different flavors" (356). Furthermore, he notes that in response to this pietism, there were

[9] See Luck 343-360.

> pressures . . . to suppress the convents . . . and expel the Jesuits. Together they had an extraordinary effect, for they culminated in a confessional war and had political overtones sufficient to advance the cause of liberal radicalism and the adoption of a new federalistic constitution in place of the Federal Pact (356).

This confessional conflict would pit conservative Catholic cantons against liberal radicals. The situation intensified between 1840 and 1842 an would lead to the formation of the *Sonderbund* -- a collective of seven Catholic cantons (Luck 360). As the divisions in Switzerland became deeper, Keller, living in Munich, was exposed to the liberal radicalism of the *Vormärz* period in Germany.[10] Upon his return in 1843,

> [a]ngeregt durch die Lyrikbände von Georg Herwegh und Anastasius Grün, typische Produkte der aufgewühlten Vormärz-Epoche, warf sich Keller auf die politische Dichtung und schrieb, den Vorbildern folgend und seiner eigenen Einstellung entsprechend, kämpferishce Gedichte im Sinne des Liberalismus (Kittstein 11).

Keller would later join the conflict physically as he took part in attacks against the Catholic cantons in both 1844 and 1845 (Kittstein 12). This information alone suffices to explain why Keller's *Legenden* need to be read as something more than works explaining, codifying and ironizing the Catholic dogmatics present in Kosegarten's versions. Such a reading is clearly incompatible with the facts.

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[10] It is also significant that Keller is a native of Zurich, which throughout history has been a place of intersecting and sometimes radical thoughts. Keller was reared in a place where one is expected to question the status quo.

However, as mentioned earlier, there is more at stake. This is especially true considering a Swiss constitution was completed in 1848. This was a paradigm shift. The new federal state was ushered in to replace the old confederacy. Keller's short-term political aims were achieved, so why, beginning in the 1850s, would he work on a cycle of stories that reinforce a message connected to the revolutionary movement of the 1840s?

Though Keller spent the vast majority of his life in Zurich, his short excursion to Munich was not his only experience abroad. From 1848 to 1855, Keller split his time between the German university town of Heidelberg and the Prussian capital of Berlin. Much has been made about Keller's time in Heidelberg (1848-1850), as it was during these years he was introduced to the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach's philosophy amounted to a rejection of religion, and indeed Christianity, as the engine driving the world. His conclusions on this topic are evident in this passage from his *Das Wesen des Christentums*:

> Wir haben bewiesen, daß der *Inhalt* und *Gegenstand* der Religion ein durchaus *menschlicher* ist… daß die Religion nicht nur die Mächte des menschlichen Wesens, sondern selbst auch die Schwachheiten, die subjektivsten Wünsche des menschlichen Herzens, wie z.B. in den Wundern unbedingt bejaht – bewiesen, daß auch die *göttliche Weisheit menschliche Weisheit,* daß das *Geheimnis der Theologie* die *Anthropologie,* des absoluten Geistes der sogenannte endliche subjektive Geist ist. (443)

And, though Feuerbach's thought did influence Keller, and evidence of this can be found in Keller's *Legenden* (as is mentioned in virtually every scholarly essay on Keller), characterizing the *Legenden* as an anti-Catholic, Feuerbachian rewrite of Kosegarten's *Legenden* fails to capture the complexities of the world Keller wishes to expose. What Keller is really offering the reader is a complex mash-up of anti-clerical positioning, including anti-Catholic sentiment, questions about the prevailing Protestant world-view coupled with a commentary on the structure of everyday life in the bourgeois world, including the role of families and women and the dangers inherent in nationalism. To begin untangling this web of concerns, we must then turn to Keller's time in Berlin and beyond, as only then can we understand the larger meanings of his *Legenden.*

In April of 1850, Keller relocated to Berlin (Kittstein 15). When he arrived, he was confronted with the backlash to the failed German Revolution of 1848. He was now living in a reactionary, heavily censored Prussia that was attempting to "re-establish firmly the conservative, bureaucratic state of authority and order, and to protect against all forms of liberalism and all those tendencies that had governed the revolution" (Nipperdey 599). This environment, quite the opposite of Keller's newly formed Switzerland, did indeed prove challenging for the Swiss writer. However, once he immersed himself in the "gescheiteren Teil der literarischen Kreise Berlins," Keller turned this difficult situation into one of the most productive periods of his career (Ermattinger 200-203). And, as noted in the opening of this work, it was during this time that he first encountered Kosegarten's *Legenden* and

began working on his own version. Thus, it is no surprise that traces of this reactionary Prussia and Keller's criticisms of it can be found in *Die Sieben Legenden.*

As part of the conservative reaction in Prussia (a thoroughly Protestant state), the "rationale of 'public safety' was used not only against insurrection but also most vigorously against the freedom of assembly . . . , " and "schools were to revert to a basis of simplicity, obedience and religion"(Nipperdey 600-601). In Keller's *Legenden*, we see that dogmatic religion is problematic, and that religion here should be understood to encompass both Catholicism and Protestantism -- he follows Feuerbach rather than Protestantism in what he rejects. Moreover, we see in many of his characters a distinct *disobedience* regarding the letter of religious law. For instance, it is because of their "disobedience" that Vitalis and Beatrix find love and salvation through their engagement with the world. And, when Keller's other characters adhere to the prescribed order, they are greeted only with loss. Musa, through her deal with King David, forsakes her joy of dancing on earth, only to be denied this joy in heaven. Dorothea hastily "marries" God and misses her chance for a happy life with Theophilus. Eugenia flees from the world and into spirituality and can only be rescued by Aquilinus' love. And, finally, Bertrade's obedience to a terrible husband (Gebizo) threatens her life and ultimately nets her an incompetent knight (Zendelwald) as a replacement.[11]

[11] Again, the significance of Zendelwald representing imperial Germany cannot be overlooked. If he is to be seen as the prize for obedience, surely it can be asserted that acquiescing to the directives of a reactionary Prussia leaves one with very little; or, if we play out the symbolism – a knight lacking true virtue.

Reading even further into Keller's *Legenden,* we also are confronted with a commentary on the role of women in bourgeois society. What Keller would find during his time in Berlin and continue to notice after his return to Zurich is a society where a woman was "primarily defined by and in her relationship to man. Her claims to education were to be defined, not by her personal need or wish for self-development but by the requirements of husband, household, and children" (Sagarra 153). Keller's women turn this situation upside down. The nuclear family and, most pointedly, the figure of the mother are absent in Keller's *Legenden*, and his female protagonists either defy this model of repression or suffer because of their adherence to it.[12] Eugenia strives for education and only errs in her ways when she exchanges education for the spirituality of the man's world. Beatrix and Jole's actions are based on their own desires and each displays the capacity to outthink a man. Musa, Dorothea and Bertrade should be read as victims of the patriarchal system. That Keller would portray family in this way makes sense, considering that his own mother was properly educated and proved to be capable of heading the family after the death of his father (Ermattinger 16-17).

Keller's Return to Zurich

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[12] Also significant is that, in these legends, Mother Mary does not live with her family in heaven, but instead she lives alone at her altar – further evidence that Keller has no interest in preserving the nuclear family as such.

After considering Keller's experiences in his native Switzerland and his second visit to Germany, we gain a deeper understanding of Keller's ironically reproduced legends and can begin to view them as nothing less than political. However, one troubling question remains. If Keller returned to Switzerland with this material in 1855, why did it take him until 1871 to publish the legends? It is my contention that this delay was not only related to his position as *Staatsschreiberamt* (which he began in 1861) and the demands it made on his time,[13] but also very much a function of a constant flow of new ideas to be explored within the text of the *Legenden.*

When Keller began his position as *Staatsschreiber,* it was with a critical distance from the Alfred Escher regime and the "Plutokraten" leading the young nation (Kittsetin 16). And, though a new constitution would be drafted in Zurich in 1869 that would increase the voting base and challenge Escher's government of the wealthy (Luck 413), Keller's *Legenden* point to his continued mistrust, as they clearly lay out his civic concerns about a set of political "cloistered saints" who were following the letter of the constitutional evolution, but missing its spirit. Furthermore, the allegory in *Die Jungfrau als Ritter* where Germany (the knight lacking virtue) defeats both France and Pan-Slavism shows Keller's awareness of the intensifying *großdeutsch* vs *kleindeutsch* debate in Germany, only coming to an end at the conclusion of Bismarck's wars of unification in 1871 (Sagarra 131). Finally,

[13] This is the claim made by Kittstein 16-17

we must imagine that the doctrine of papal infallibility, introduced in 1870 (Luck 415), served only to sharpen that side of Keller's critique.

Rather than characterizing Keller's *Die Sieben Legenden* as a delayed work, I find it more appropriate to consider it a work that was long in progress and waiting for its moment as political commentary. In this reading they were to serve as a reminder to those who may not remember the political difficulties of which Keller was very aware and as a warning to those who might forget that political promises are much like those spiritual promises exposed in his tales -- empty if they cannot work for you here and now. After all, it can be argued that revolution is simply another form of religion.

Though they make no mention of the *Sieben Legenden,* the contributors to *A Short History of Switzerland,* published in 1952, sum up Keller's concerns and life long political engagement well when they write, "[W]ith increasing bitterness, the ageing poet attacked the enemies of public life" (one could insert the Church, reactionaries or greedy plutocrats here), yet "[b]itter experience did not make the aged Keller repudiate the ideals of his youth. He remained a lover of freedom and progress in every sphere, and imagined that every reasonable human being must think as he did"(328). I consider the *Sieben Legenden* to have been published as a reminder for those "reasonable human beings" and as a warning to those easily swayed by empty impulses and political promises.

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